

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Macmillan Dictionary of the Australian Environment.** David Meagher. Published by The Macmillan Company of Australia Pty Ltd, Melbourne. 1991. viii + 366 pp. & 6 maps. ISBN 0 7329 0340 4 (paperback). Price \$AU29.95.

There are a lot of dictionaries in circulation. They range from pocket guides to French or Latin, to purportedly comprehensive guides to just about any subject. David Meagher's dictionary falls somewhere between these two extremes. The subject is of such a vague nature that it could never hope to be comprehensive and, besides being too big for a pocket, it contains too many esoteric terms to interest the casual reader. It is a dictionary designed for those who write or read about the Australian environment. Given this audience, is David Meagher providing a compendium of definitions which is not readily available elsewhere, or at least improving upon existing dictionaries?

On the positive side, the layout is good and the entries are easy to find. Cross-referencing is extensive and logical. Appendices include lists of endangered and extinct animals and plants, international treaties and SI unit conversions. Following a brief bibliography there is a series of maps showing geographical, climatic and biotic regions, and major mining locations, in Australia. So the coverage is broad.

Unfortunately, I don't think this neatly produced book is an 'essential reference work' or 'an invaluable guide for students and the lay person interested in the environment' (as is suggested on the back cover). The major problem is that David Meagher has tried to cover *too* broad a range of topics. A slimmer volume concentrating on terms not covered by currently available dictionaries would have been of greater value. This would also have allowed him to leave out a range of words which I think are poorly or misleadingly defined. The obvious rejoinder to such criticism is that few people have access to these other dictionaries and it is worthwhile collating relevant terms together in one publication. Besides creating a never-ending network of dictionaries, such a rationale would require an extremely judicious choice of words, all provided with accurate and precise definitions (so that one doesn't have to regularly seek out supplementary dictionaries). *The Macmillan Dictionary of the Australian Environment* does not meet these criteria.

It may seem trite to extract and analyse individual words as a means of judging the whole book, but I only do so to emphasize a few general points. Most common morphological terms are defined — you will find *ovate* but not *trullate* — but without illustration (you will have to look through your state floras and faunas to find such pictures). However, is this definition of *ovate* much use: 'having a broad base and a narrower apex'? Does that mean shaped like a wine-flagon, a pyramid, a buddha or a section through the long-axis of an egg? For botanical topics, I would use *A Glossary of Botanical Terms* (by B. D. Jackson) or *Botanical Latin* (by W. T. Stearn) to get a more comprehensive range and more precise definitions.

David Meagher states in his introduction that animal and plant taxa are listed down to family level (although the occasional genus pops up, e.g. the seal genus *Otaria*). He then goes on to apologize for the 'notable' absence of insects from his definitions. No mention is made of families of bacteria, algae, fungi, mosses and ferns, which are also notably missing. Of course their omission could be justified, as are the insects, by the lack of suitable information. But it isn't. Once again I don't see the point of including this selection of taxonomic titbits. The information is available in books such as *The Plant Book* (by D.J. Mabberley), *Flowering Plants and Ferns* (by J.C. Willis) and similar books for animals.

Nomenclatural terms are obscurely and often incorrectly defined. For example, a *paratype* is not just 'a specimen, other than a holotype (or replacement holotype) that is left over from the original material after the taxonomic description and classification of an organism has been made'. For a start, what is the 'original material'. Even if you understand such allusions, the definition is still

incorrect. A paratype is, at least in the *International Code of Botanical Nomenclature*, a specimen cited in the protologue other than the holotype or isotype (or syntypes). The point is that such terms cannot be described simply and should have been left out. No-one is going to want a vague definition of a nomenclatural term.

Other annoying lapses are to be found. *Cladistics* is defined on the basis of a minor criticism of the method, which does nothing to explain what this rigorous and informative technique has to offer to taxonomy. Once again, it would have been better to leave it out. *Keystone species* is defined as a 'critical species'. Does this help? If such definitions were tightened up, and all morphological, nomenclatural and systematic terminology removed, the resultant slimmer (?and cheaper) book would nicely complement the existing array of dictionaries. It would still include such diverse terms as *cinnamon fungus*, *clearfelling*, *lead arsenate*, *Churchill National Park*, *Claus kiln*, *World Heritage List* and *Ranger Inquiry*. These are the terms I will be looking for when I use *The Macmillan Dictionary of the Australian Environment*.

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